

naire, and he looked intently at her. She flushed darkly, and somehow Belmont guessed much of what he owed her and why he owed it.

He took her hand. "Perdita," he said softly, "it is you whom I have to thank for the help—the letter—the means of escaping the Zephyrs—I know it. Tell me why you schemed so desperately to help a despised légionnaire."

But Perdita was silent, and her eyes no longer met his. It seemed to Belmont that he was moving, speaking, living, in dreams. Strangely, as he stood there, holding the hand of the Spanish girl, there rose before him a memory of the last occasion on which he stood alone with a woman holding his hand. That had been during a period when he moved in very different surroundings, and in a very different manner. And the woman had been of a different class—yes, and a different character too. She would have drawn her skirts aside from a poor beast of a légionnaire instinctively; indeed, she had, in effect, drawn her skirts aside from an officer of English cavalry—from him, Belmont, because he was so poor in comparison with a new eligible. Indeed, thought Belmont bitterly, she was of a different class from Perdita of the Café du Legion. She had said to the last that she loved him; but he had never seen in her eyes such a look as he had seen in those of the Spanish girl when he took her hand.

Belmont understood without words that Perdita loved him, and mingled with the passion of gratitude that now flooded his spirit was a new feeling. He did not know whether it was love (a légionnaire soon forgets about love), but it was something tremulous and wonderful, some such torment of anxiety to prove devotion or adoration as may have possessed those frenzied idolaters of India who used to throw themselves beneath the wheels of the car of Juggernaut. Wave upon wave of intense emotion swept across his mind—gratitude, amazement, many emotions. He was grateful for her love, he was grateful for her help. On the verge of tears he pulled himself together.

"You love me!" he said rather than asked.

She raised her lips to his, with a little low cry of content. For a moment she forgot everything, everyone—but one.

Then a man coughed dryly at the door, and they turned. It was The Shoulder, hunched, sinister. There was something vulturine in his pose. He removed his cigarette with a flourish. "Good day, Señorita. Légionnaire, I congratulate you," he said sweetly. But his mouth was wry and evil with hate and envy and malice.

CHAPTER VII. The Shoulder Is Generous

THE man with the hunched shoulder stepped into the café, sat down, lit a fresh cigarette, and spoke. "It is easy to see that there has not been time for Perdita to explain things fully to you, Légionnaire," he said sardonically. "Perhaps then it would be better if I were to explain to you. I am well qualified, believe me, Légionnaire. I am a man who is placid, kind hearted, of an easy disposition, and unemotional." But the wry and bitter smile on his lips contradicted every word he said.

Belmont looked at Perdita questioningly. He was vaguely conscious of complications to come; he guessed that his rescue was no simple matter of an appeal to the Colonel by Perdita. Something sinister lay behind it all.

Perdita hesitated, then nodded. "He will explain," she said, a little catch in her voice.

Belmont turned to The Shoulder, waiting.

"I am a simple man, Légionnaire," said The Shoulder, "and I will tell my tale simply." He flicked the ash from his cigarette, and dropped his voice. "I love Perdita. Perdita loves you. But you do not love her. You desert—you are captured. I say to Perdita, 'I will save him, I will arrange for him to leave Africa without punishment, if you will be my wife.' Perdita agrees to that. I arrange the half of your rescue, and ask you to come to my house that I may perfect my plans for your escape. But you do not come. So I come to Perdita to ask her how I can help you—and I find her in your arms, Légionnaire! That is the explanation," he repeated.

Belmont flushed a little; for, loathe the man though he might, he could not overcome an uneasy feeling that he had not been treated fairly. He turned to Perdita; but the girl said nothing; only stared at him, her eyes full of pain.

"Is this true, Perdita?" he asked softly.

She nodded.

"You love me; but you do not love this man?"

She nodded again, her lips quivering.

"And you agreed to marry him to save me from the penal battalion—to help me get free from the Legion?"

"It is all true," said Perdita.

Belmont thought for a moment. He had to decide. He knew that The Shoulder would still keep his bargain, if he was permitted to do so; but there was Perdita. She was the price. Belmont realized that he could go free, if he allowed the girl to sacrifice herself. That was what it meant—twist it, gloss it, distort it, how he might.

Belmont pulled himself together, and decided. "It is impossible, of course," he said, and, curiously, his voice, his tone, his whole air, were for a moment no longer those of a légionnaire, but belonged to the old days. He turned to The Shoulder. "You must understand that I should never have consented to such a bargain if I had been consulted. Perdita goes free—and I return to the Legion and take whatever punishment awaits me!"

Even as he spoke the words of the Colonel seemed to ring in his ears: "I will have you sent to the penal battalion for life!"

Well, so be it! He knew that the Colonel would keep his word. But the whole soul of him sickened and revolted at the thought of leaving the girl who tried to save him to the mercy of this ruffian from the Village

Nègre. He heard himself saying like a man in a dream: "Certainly, I will return to the Legion. I cannot permit the alternative you suggest."

The girl started forward with a cry; for she, like everyone who has to do with the Legion, knew of the barbarous and Draconic punishment meted out to the men who have broken the iron regulations of the regiment.

THE Shoulder stiffened, looking curiously at Belmont. "You would do that?" he queried incredulously. But without waiting for an answer he again continued in a quick, malignant whisper. He saw that if Belmont returned without the letters the Colonel needed so badly he, The Shoulder, would lose Perdita irrevocably, and he was suddenly anxious.

"Fools!" he said. "You plan, you scheme, you arrange—all without me! What can you do without me? Listen! You cannot return to the regiment again, in any case. You must get away at once. Your Colonel, when he has had time to think, will never rest until you are dead. And why? Because, while he commands a French regiment, he is in the pay of the German Bureau of Espionage. He writes to an old friend in Antwerp, a clever, little, simple letters that mean what they do not seem to mean. And they are about affairs in Algeria and Morocco. All the world knows that Germany is anxious to get an entry to Morocco. Your Colonel, Légionnaire, is helping her—and I do not blame him. France should pay men who control such a regiment of swine as the Legion what they are worth. And the letters that the Colonel wants are all letters that come with his pay from his friend in Antwerp, who forwards the Colonel's reports to his masters in Berlin. Do you understand? That is why the Colonel let you go and gave you leave to find the letters. I have them. They were stolen by the Colonel's own orderly, and he sold them to me. The Colonel was afraid and desperate; so he seized at a straw—and let you go to secure the other letters. But soon—soon—he will see what a fool he was to let a man who knows him to be a traitor go free. He will have Sidi Bel Abbes ransacked for you, and you will be doomed, Légionnaire!"

Belmont nodded. "Well, there is no choice. I return, in any case. I care nothing about the Colonel; what I do I do for the sake of Perdita."

The Shoulder gave in—or appeared to give in. "You mule English!" he said. He turned to Perdita. "I relinquish you, little fool!" he said wryly. "But do not forget that I loved you. I will swear that. I will prove it; for I will give the légionnaire Belmont the remaining letters which he shall send his Colonel, and for your wedding gift I will give you both disguises and money to take you out of the country. You will believe then that I loved you."

BELMONT'S heart leaped. Here was a way out! It had not occurred to him that the man from the Village Nègre could be capable of such generosity. And Perdita seemed speechless with astonishment.

The Shoulder laughed. "You thought I was all bad, eh?" he said. "Well, you shall see that it is not so. I am a gambler—if I win, what then? I take my winnings and—I smile. If I lose—well? I pay my losses—and I smile! *Voilà tout!*"

And he smiled; but it was the smile of a devil in torment. Belmont did not notice it; he was looking at Perdita.

"Come with me to my house before I change my mind, Légionnaire—and I will give you the papers," said The Shoulder in a voice he tried to make cordial. "It will not be more than five minutes."

Belmont hesitated. "Why did you buy the letters originally?" he asked.

"To blackmail your estimable commander, Légionnaire," The Shoulder said, shrugging carelessly. "But I choose to give them to Perdita for a wedding gift instead."

Belmont nodded. He hated the whole thing; but it was for the sake of Perdita. He would go through with it. "Shall I go?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said in no more than a whisper. Then she turned to The Shoulder and thanked him. "You are so kind to me that I am ashamed," she said humbly, looking down.

The man from the Village Nègre murmured something, still smiling. The light in his eyes was unholy and half insane.

Then he and Belmont left the café together—and if ever murderer walked with his prey one walked then.

"My house is near—it is quite close at hand," said The Shoulder hoarsely, his fingers twitching. "The letters are there—quite ready—quite ready for you to take. Follow me!" and the two passed into the poisonous squalor of the Village Nègre.

CHAPTER VIII. The House of the Master Ruffian

IT was evident to Belmont, as it was to everyone who had the questionable honor of accompanying the man through the Village Nègre, that The Shoulder was the master ruffian of that haunt of ruffians. The strange silence that fell at his approach, the cringes away from him, and the undisguised fear in which most of those they met plainly held him, showed that. Had he been himself, it is doubtful whether Belmont would have gone to the man's house unarmed. But he had not yet wholly recovered from his ordeal in the desert and later, and he thought of little but that The Shoulder was a ruffian who, for love of Perdita, desired to do one good deed at the least. It seemed natural to him now that he too loved the girl.

So they passed into the hot and gloomy house of The Shoulder. It was furnished strangely. Originally Moorish in design, and probably furnishing, it looked now like a curiosity shop stocked at random with the strangest jumble of modern and ancient goods—curtains, carpets, weapons, clothing, works of art, tools, books, an extraordinary collection. The place was no more than a receiver's den, the clearing house of half the professional thieves of North Africa.

A gigantic negro came quickly and silently from an alcove as they passed down a thickly carpeted corridor. But at a gesture from The Shoulder he vanished as silently as he came.

An odor of Arabian cigarettes hung on the oppressive atmosphere, and once Belmont heard the notes of some stringed instrument and the shrill laughter of women in a far part of the house.

The Shoulder entered a room at the end of the corridor which was furnished wholly in the Moorish style,

Continued on page 18



His Clenched Fist Lashed Full Into the Horrid Face Before Him.